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ABSTRACT

This module offers suggestions for improving cooperating teacher-student teacher conferences. The first section deals with establishing rapport and creating a climate that is supportive and non-threatening to the student teacher. Specific teaching skills which the cooperating teacher should emphasize in the conference are discussed: (1) planning for instruction; (2) teaching methods and materials used; (3) classroom management; (4) skill in handling materials and equipment; (5) keeping records; (6) personal relations with students and staff; and (7) personal qualities related to teaching performance. In the second and third sections, suggestions are made on planning a conference format and for dealing with student teachers who have special problems or negative attitudes. Four specific suggestions are made for improving conferences in the fourth section, and a list of questions is provided for evaluation of the conference's effectiveness. (JD)

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES FOR SUPERVISING TEACHERS

HOLDING CONFERENCES WITH STUDENT TEACHERS

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

This self-instructional module contains an audio tape and some printed materials. It is designed to assist you, a classroom supervising teacher, in the process of improving your conferences with your student teacher. The recommended procedure is first to listen to that portion of the audio tape which illustrates a poorly-conducted conference. The tape will then direct you to read this booklet which contains suggestions for conducting effective conferences with student teachers. Finally, listen to the second portion of the audio tape which attempts to illustrate an effective conference.

Working with Your Student Teacher

As the cooperating teacher, you are the person in the school with whom the student teacher has the closest contact. You see what is happening in the classroom and are, therefore, in the best position to evaluate your student teacher's progress. You are the first link between him/her and the students, so it will be up to you to make sure that he/she is aware of their needs and the ways in which these needs can be fulfilled. You are also the liaison between the student teacher and the rest of the school's staff. And, you are the mainstay upon whom he/she must be able to depend for whatever support is needed during the student teaching experience.

Often problems arise for the student teacher. However, many of these problems can be solved during your conferences. Through conferencing, you will want to help the student teacher learn to evaluate him/herself. This can best be learned by your own example. The conference is also a time to share experiences in teaching that might be useful, give advice, discuss new ideas, and plan for and evaluate the rate of improvement. The student teacher should see the conference in a positive light--an opportunity to broaden perspective, increase insight, and develop competence.

Except for special circumstances, regularly-scheduled conferences

are best. While at first the idea of having meetings that are regularly scheduled may seem regimented and time-consuming, you will find that the student teacher feels less anxiety about the conferences if they are a routine part of the day. The student teacher will find it easier to bring up new ideas or problems if you are meeting together on a regular basis. Each of you should keep a list of points to be discussed at the conference. This will provide some security for the student teacher, since he/she will know that any concerns that he/she has will be considered, and any difficulties that you notice will be brought to his/her attention immediately. Regular conferences will assure you of a much freer, more fulfilling relationship with your student teacher.

If occasion arrises for a special conference, a reason for it should be given so that the other party might prepare, and so adequate time might be allotted for the session.

Generally the conferences should be held in private if possible--perhaps in the classroom after the students have left. That way, any of the materials you wish to refer to will be on hand and neither of you will have to be concerned about interference from other people. It is important that the student teacher not be made open to embarrassment by having others overhear the conferences. Even in cases where complete privacy is not possible, however, conferences should never be held in front of the students. This could be threatening to the authoritative position of the student teacher.

The length of the conference may vary, depending upon how many

items need to be discussed. When a lesson goes well, praise the student teacher and give him/her the opportunity to raise questions. Other lessons may require more discussion, so more time should be given. However, a conference lasting more than forty-five minutes would be taxing for both of you.

Because immediate feedback is best, conferences should be held as soon as possible after the lesson. A conference each day before the student teacher leaves the school building is ideal. This serves several purposes: The lessons that took place that day as well as the events surrounding them are fresh in the minds of both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher so specific references can be cited easily. Questions may be answered immediately. If the student teacher is uncertain as to how to proceed, this can be remedied. If the cooperating teacher feels that the student teacher is doing something which requires correction, suggestions can be made before it becomes a problem. If the student teacher needs encouragement, he/she will get it immediately. When the lesson goes well, he/she should be praised so that there is increased incentive to continue to do well.

The conference at the end of the day is also a good time to plan activities for the next day. A brief description of what the student teacher plans to accomplish, what materials are needed and available, and ideas as to how the lesson may be accomplished should be discussed so the student teacher can be fully prepared the next day.

The conference need not be unpleasant. It does not have to be negative, and should not be held only if there is negative criticism

to be given. Positive points should always be noted. If the conference is positive, there should be no feelings of threat or anxiety on the part of the student teacher. It is important to stress that the suggestions and comments you make are not meant as personal affronts, but as suggestions for helping him/her to be better able to meet the demands of a very demanding profession. Make it clear that you do not intend to criticize for specific personality characteristics, but strive instead to encourage him/her to use his/her traits and talents in the most effective way.

The purpose of conferences is to evaluate the student teacher's strengths and weaknesses and to continue to work on them. Emphasize strong areas and eventually strengthen the weak ones. Be aware that the student teacher will, especially at first, be somewhat sensitive. You are, after all, discussing him/her in relation to a career choice and the degree of success which may be expected in this field. He/she probably feels some anxiety about his/her success because a long period of work has been devoted to becoming a teacher, and student teaching is considered the proving ground. Any positive statements you make, therefore, will decrease this anxiety.

You, as the cooperating teacher, may feel some anxiety, too. Will the student teacher be adequate? Will there be a comfortable adjustment to the scheme of your class? You hope to be able to help and be helped by your student teacher. If he/she does not have adequate skills, that will present a problem to you. But remember, the student teacher wants to be a good teacher and not make mistakes. Since every situation is

different, even those with a great deal of experience are bound to make some mistakes. Help him/her to minimize errors and adjust for those mistakes which do occur. Work together to improve the student teacher's skills. A cooperative effort will alleviate anxiety on both sides.

Your open-minded attitude, friendliness, and willingness to work together should be present and clearly identifiable from the very beginning. Show the student teacher that you are open to suggestions; welcome ideas; ask how he/she feels about things that go on in the class; and engage in open discussion about what will be best for the class. The conference should not be an opportunity for the cooperating teacher to lecture. It should be a give-and-take experience. Be willing to share your experience and ideas as well as to view the student teacher's ideas and suggestions with an open mind.

The relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher should be dynamic--each learning from the other, with the student teacher being quite dependent on the cooperating teacher at first and moving toward real independence later, using the cooperating teacher only as a guide.

There are some qualities that the cooperating teacher may develop in order to facilitate this change. You should be a helper so the student teacher can change him/herself rather than be manipulated to change. Have a people-oriented philosophy instead of an autocratically-oriented one. Be creative and resourceful in order to suggest workable solutions to problems. Be a good listener--able to restate the thought and feeling of ideas--so the student teacher can clearly make his/her own decisions.

During the conferences the cooperating teacher and the student teacher should agree on some objectives in terms of behaviors they would like to achieve. Objectives should be clearly identified in order to know if progress is being made toward meeting them. Evaluation, like learning, is a continuous process. Therefore, the student teacher and the cooperating teacher should at first examine the expected outcomes and identify what progress has already been made. Next, identify what improvement is necessary and how it can be achieved. The student teacher should take an active role in the planning and evaluation of his/her own work. This will stimulate growth in these valuable self-assessment skills.

While goals should be developed with the needs of the individual in mind, there are certain skills that all teachers must develop. The cooperating teacher should provide instruction in these skills if necessary as part of the conference. Some skills may need to be mentioned only once, while others may require more time and effort to develop. These skills include:

1. Planning for instruction. The student teacher and the cooperating teacher should agree on what would be desirable outcomes and acceptable performance for the learners. They should then discuss the degree to which the learner objectives were achieved through effort of the student teacher, and ways the student teacher could modify his/her behavior to facilitate the learning process. In the plan for improvement, focus on a few specific behaviors rather than on global generalities. Success in reaching short-term goals results in the achievement of long-term goals.

2. Teaching methods and materials used. Keep in mind the kind of students you have, the methods that are best for them, the available materials, how to work with what you have, and what can be reasonably added. The student teacher needs to learn to judge such things, but sophisticated skill in this area comes only with experience.

3. Classroom management. Discuss the kinds of discipline that are called for and agree upon a philosophy. Discuss the students, since

you know more about them than the student teacher does.

4. Ease in handling materials. The student teacher should be as comfortable with the materials he/she is using as possible so that attention can be focused on the students and the teaching instead of on the manipulation of materials. This implies that he/she should practice using unfamiliar equipment and special materials before the lesson is given.

5. Keeping records. Most record keeping is not difficult. There are, however, certain procedures your student teacher must learn. Experience will develop an ease in keeping up-to-date and accurate records.

6. Personal relations. The student teacher must be able to get along with the students as well as the other members of the staff.

7. Personal qualities which are related to teaching performance. Items in this category include manner of dress and speech, habits, and various personality characteristics. If any criticism is to be made in this area, it should be made in a way that emphasizes the positive qualities and indicates suggested ways to improve those which are less desirable.

While the student teaching experience is a practical one, there should also be some intellectual development. Help the student teacher learn to design his/her own plans. Demonstrate the importance and value of using references, selecting material in the references which is applicable, and generating ideas from those sources. The cooperating teacher should also make the student teacher aware of any publications, journals, and other resources which apply to your particular situation. All of this should be accomplished during the conference.

The Conference Format

The conference should begin with a positive statement. Next, give the student teacher an opportunity to express his/her feelings about the lesson. Finally, express your opinions. Letting the student teacher critique himself may alleviate the need for you to criticize directly. In this way, what may have been an assault on his/her methods will become instead a discussion leading to suggestions for improvement.

The cooperating teacher should note the positive points of the lesson as well as the negative. In preparation for the conference, the student teacher should also list things he/she thinks were particularly good and those which were not good. He/she should also have a list of questions, areas where he/she would like assistance, and issues he/she would like to discuss. Often the things listed by the student teacher will be the same as those listed by the cooperating teacher. The student teacher may even bring up points that the cooperating teacher did not realize were presenting a problem. At other times, the student teacher may think he/she did well but you do not agree. Discuss your differences. One approach would be to ask the student teacher why something was done the way it was. Help him/her to think about what he/she is doing and find his/her own solution. This is far more valuable than dictating what changes should be made. Possibly the difference of

opinion stems from a lack of communication--you may not understand what the student teacher was trying to accomplish or the student teacher may not realize that something came across in a way different from how he/she meant it. When you discuss these differences, suggestions for improvement can be formulated by both of you.

Dealing with Special Problems

Most student teachers are eager to learn--they want to try their skills and learn new ones. Therefore, they are generally receptive to the conference because they see it as a means of self-improvement. There may be some student teachers, however, who are not receptive to the conference. Those people will present a problem which must be worked through before the conference will be of any value. While such student teachers may appear to be confident, they may, in fact, question their own skill and be so insecure that the conference poses a threat. Other student teachers may view suggestions as limits on their freedom or threats to their creativity and the fulfillment of their potential. Others may feel so confident that they will not even listen to suggestions. While these people often do have a great deal to offer, they need to be made aware that all people could use some improvement, and that all you want to do is help them to know when they need it. This can be done in a very supportive way by saying things like "Yes, that was great, but imagine if you had tried (this), too." Make your suggestions sound like additions to their already-good ideas. It is especially important for this type of student teacher to feel that he/she is relating to the cooperating teacher on an equal level--sharing things rather than being the "less knowing" of the two. He/she must understand that the point

of a conference is to help someone who is already effective to become even more effective.

Resistance to the conference may also be a defense used to cover the student teacher's own sense of inadequacy. If you find that to be true, handle him/her in the same way as you would someone who has good skills, except that, of course, you will need to make a greater number of suggestions. In time, this non-threatening approach will allow defenses to be lowered so improvement can be made.

While a non-directive approach is usually the most effective, there are times when a direct approach is required. It may be in order to stress a point to a problem person as described above. If the person is being too aggressive or is not doing anything because he/she does not sense the need to, you will also have to be quite direct in your approach. An extremely timid person--uncertain in his/her ability and afraid to try--will also need direction and support until he/she becomes more secure. It is especially important to emphasize any positive actions and to give praise because this person requires your support and encouragement more than most student teachers. As he/she begins to feel more secure, you will be able to be less directive and spend less time reassuring him/her.

Improving Your Conferences

Here are some suggestions for improving your conferences:

1. You can learn the needs of the student teacher so as to be able to fulfill them by having a conference entirely directed by the student teacher. Evaluate what happened during it. Combine his/her needs and your own style to make the conference most effective for both of you.

2. At the end of every conference, ask yourself these questions: Who did most of the talking? Did we share problems? Was I aware of the needs of the student teacher in discussing the lesson?

3. At the end of every conference, analyze what was said and by whom. Are all of the statements you or your student teacher made of a similar nature--happy, sad, positive, negative, complaining, critical, avoiding the issue? Examine the quality of the statements you are making and identify areas where you can improve for the next conference. Try to elicit the kinds of statements that will be helpful from the student teacher, too.

4. Evaluate the amount of direction this student teacher needs. Are you being too directive or too non-directive? Be aware of how you can best help the student teacher and be able to change your approach as his/her needs change.

These questions will help you evaluate the effectiveness of your conferences:

1. Does the student teacher approach me with new ideas?

2. Does the student teacher bring up problems he/she is having?

3. Do we communicate freely and clearly?

4. When I make a suggestion for improvement, is it implemented in the classroom?

5. Is the student teacher learning to evaluate him/herself objectively?

6. Is the growth of the student teacher steady and observable, indicating productive conferences?

Please return to the tape and listen to the rest of it. You will hear the same cooperating teacher and student teacher discussing the same problems as on the first half of the tape. This time, however, they are implementing skills discussed in this manual. What differences do you notice?

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